

James 2:14-26

James 2:14-26 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? (17) Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (18) But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble! (20) But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (22) Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? (23) And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. (24) You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. (25) Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (26) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Questions On The Text

What else do we need besides works?

Verses 14-17: It is not enough to claim to have faith if a person does not have works to back it up. That kind of faith is dead (useless) as works are the proof of our faith. Real faith is demonstrated in a practical way by our conduct.

“Depart in peace, be warmed and filled” (vs. 16) is like a blessing or even a prayer. But James is saying that if a person is in need it is insufficient to just bless them or pray for them if it is in your power to help them. (See Proverbs 3:27-28.) This is not a responsibility that we have to the entire world, but to a “brother or sister.” Our own brothers and sisters in Christ are “those to whom it is due.”

How is faith demonstrated?

Verse 18: Faith can only be demonstrated by works. Talk is cheap. This whole passage centres upon a person who claims to have faith, but does not have works. Jesus covered a similar situation when He gave a story of a man with two sons. When the father asked the first son to work in the field, he said he wouldn't, but did. When he asked the second son to work in the field, he said he would, but didn't. Jesus pointed out that the one who did the will of his father wasn't the one who talked about doing his will, but the one who actually walked in obedience and did it. (See Matthew 21:28-31.)

What example is given to show that faith alone is insufficient?

Verse 19: It is important to realise that when it comes to faith that lacks works, even the demons have that kind of faith. The word for “tremble” means to bristle, as in when the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. This is an indication of the fear and horror the demons experience at the thought of God's existence. All this is an illustration of how believing in God's existence is worthless unless it leads to personal transformation.

Even a confession of faith is not enough if it isn't reflected in life transformation. Jesus commended Peter for his confession of faith (Matthew 16:16), but demons made similar confessions (see Mark 1:24; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:26) and are not the recipients of salvation.

How is faith without works described?

Verse 20: The kind of faith that has no works is described as being dead. This is not to say that it isn't a kind of faith, but it definitely isn't the genuine article.

How does Abraham's example prove the point that faith minus works is dead?

Verses 21-24: When Abraham acted in obedience to God in making his son Isaac a sacrifice, this became the proof of his faith, and his faith was perfected by the act of obedience.

Interestingly, James uses the same Biblical illustration as Paul to seemingly prove the opposite. In Romans 4:1-12, Paul says that Abraham was given righteousness as a gift apart from his works. James uses Abraham to prove that we are justified by works. Actually, these are two sides of the same coin. We are justified by faith apart from our works (as Paul says). But real faith results in works due to a transformed life (as James implies). In line with what James is teaching, Paul taught that our works can actually deny our faith. (See Titus 1:16.)

How does Rahab's example prove the point that faith minus works is dead?

Verse 25: When Jericho was surrounded by the Israelites, Rahab somehow came to faith in the one true God, Yahweh. When the spies entered the city, she then demonstrated that faith by hiding them from the king's men.

James' choice of Abraham and Rahab to illustrate faith aren't just repetition. They illustrate two different aspects of faith. Abraham, in his willingness to offer his son Isaac on the altar as a burnt offering, illustrates absolute submission to the will of God. Rahab, in her willingness to hide the two spies, thereby risking her own life, illustrates the risk-taking aspect of faith.

Abraham's faith resulted in the gift of righteousness and his being called the friend of God. Rahab's faith resulted in her marrying Salmon and becoming the great-grandmother of King David. She is one of only four women (including Mary) mentioned by name in the lineage of Christ from Abraham on (see Matthew 1).

As with Abraham and Rahab, real faith results in works which demonstrate that faith. This is exactly what John the Baptist taught too (see Luke 3:7-14).

How does the body and the spirit illustrate the relationship of faith and works?

Verse 26: Even as the body is a container for the spirit, real faith is like a container for our works which God has prepared beforehand (see Ephesians 2:10). Living faith comes as a package that has the potential and empowerment for doing the works God wants us to do.

Further Questions For Discussion:

How can we ensure that we don't become people who "talk the talk" but don't "walk the walk"?

What sorts of things can we do that are practical demonstrations of our faith?

Does it matter if our works are seemingly unimportant? If not, why not?

If salvation is by the grace of God, how can we ensure that we produce the works that please God without becoming works-oriented in our relationship with God?